



*Congressional
Black Caucus
Reports to the
People*

During the consideration of the minimum wage bill, an amendment was offered that would have permitted employers to pay a sub-minimum wage to youths under 19 years of age. After a heated discussion, the House of Representatives -- by one vote -- rejected the amendment.

During the debate, I took the floor and told my colleagues that a subminimum wage for youths would establish a dangerous precedent. It is ill-conceived, misguided, and misdirected.

Sometimes in order to understand the total ramifications of the issue before us, we must step outside the context of the immediate question. Let us assume for a minute that someone proposed a race differential to the minimum wage and said, "Let's pay blacks, browns, reds, and yellows a subminimum wage because there is significant unemployment in the minority communities."

One argument would be racism, another argument would be discrimination, and this is interesting. I am sure many of my colleagues in the House of Representatives who are proponents of the subminimum wage amendment would say, "Let's not have minorities being paid a lower minimum wage because that would then create a situation where they would be exploited and white workers would be driven out of employment."

Let us then say that someone offered a sex differential amendment and said, "Let us pay women a lower salary." One would argue "sexism." And another would argue "discrimination," and another group would say, "no, let us not set up a situation where women can be exploited and men would be driven out of work.

What is the Difference?

Now someone offers an amendment providing for a youth differential. What is the difference? It is age chauvinism. It is discrimination; and it does, in fact, endanger adult employment.

If there is no validity in offering a differential with respect to race, if there is no validity in arguing for a differential with respect to sex, then, I dare say, within the framework of the democratic system, to the supporters of this proposal, "Where is the justification within our system for a lack of equity among the youths? If we cannot discriminate on the basis of race, if we cannot discriminate on sex, then why do we set up a situation that says because one happens to be a number of years of age, he or she has to work for another level of income?"

That is in diametric opposition to all the stated purposes with respect to what this country is supposed to be all about. On the principle of lack of equity, such proposal -- like this subminimum wage amendment for youths -- should be totally and absolutely rejected.

Let us go to the question of youth employment. Many people have argued that studies shown that this will enhance employment. The proponent of the amendment that sought to lower youth wages said, "I do not know what implication this has."

I would suggest that this is not a direction that we should take on the floor of Congress without having carefully thought out the ramifications. American youths are not guinea pigs. We should not legislate by the seat of our pants.

Bernard Anderson did an extensive study into this area. He pointed out that a youth differential would result in exacerbating the problems that have characterized youth employment, particularly in the area of young people turning over in jobs.

Some have argued that it would create 800,000 jobs, but it has also been documented that we may lose 500,000 adult jobs. Finally, why not offer an amendment to every single public works bill that comes to the floor of the House of Representatives which says that for every five adults employed in public works, there shall be one youth trainee? That would create jobs.

In Sweden every private industry is required to employ one trainee for every 70 full-time workers. The U.S. needs to join the rest of the world. Every single industrialized nation on the face of this earth, with the exception of the U.S., has through and regularized and systemized the transition of young people from school to the world of work.

I would suggest that we should not discriminate against young people or any human beings in our society. It flies in the face of every principle we hold dear. There are mechanisms and there are programs and creative strategies by which we can employ more young people in this country if we have the heart, the courage, the intellectual, and the spiritual fortitude to do it.

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